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## A first opera, opening the Cheltenham Music Festival & the RLPO's 2019/20 season: I chat to composer Dani Howard

Labels: [interview](#)



Dani Howard

The young Hong Kong-born British composer [Dani Howard](#) is having quite a busy year. Her first opera, *Robin Hood* was premiered earlier this year by [The Opera Story](#) in London [see [my review](#)], her new orchestral work *Gates of Spring* will open the 75th [Cheltenham Music Festival](#) tonight (5 July 2019) with [Elim Chan](#) conducting the [London Symphony Orchestra](#), and another new orchestral work *Coalescence* opens the [Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's](#) 2019/2020 season with [Vasily Petrenko](#) conducting the orchestra. I met up with Dani recently in London to chat about her new pieces, and find out how writing her first opera had gone.

Dani often bases her subject matter on the forces required and the length of the piece, so as *Gates of Spring* was required to be a short concert opener it is quite light-hearted, written for a full symphony orchestra with a big tuba solo. She describes *Gates of Spring* as being loosely based on the founding of Cheltenham as a spa town, with the title referring not to the season but to the gates which the founder of the spa put round the original spring. Her piece takes a musical journey which depicts Cheltenham as a beautiful old farmhouse, the spring being discovered by a young entrepreneur and the spa developed. So we have an atmospheric beginning, an idea, an outpouring of excitement, a false sense of confidence, doubts growing and then events building, at the end the two musical ideas representing the old and new Cheltenham merge.

*Coalescence* is somewhat longer, which forms the first work in Vasily Petrenko and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic's opening concerts (19 & 22 September 2019) of the orchestra's 2019/20 season. Dani confesses herself very excited to be working with Petrenko.

When writing works, even apparently abstract ones, she likes to have a very clear story and she talks about a solo tuba piece which arose after seen the optical illusion whereby the wheels of a car going fast can suddenly seem as if they are going backwards. *Coalescence* was inspired by a walk she used to take every day, where she suddenly noticed a huge old tree which had

grown round an iron railing, completely absorbing half of the railing. In *Coalescence* this has become an analogy for how naive humans are in thinking that they can overpower nature. So for Dani the brass represent the humans, and the rest of the orchestra nature, and the work is about a challenge between the two, but by the end neither side is the winner. *Coalescence* has been Dani's favourite piece to write so far, and she describes the process as very emotional partly because the environment is something that interests her.

Dani was born and grew up in Hong Kong where her parents worked (both had travelled there from the UK, met, liked the place and stayed). When she came to the UK to study she also found other little differences, growing up the television had been different, she did not get all British people's jokes and there were other differences like things in politics. Yet she was very English, so she started out not quite a foreigner but not quite fitting in, though this has gradually changed over eight years she has been here. And it does mean that the friends she made in the UK are from all over.

As a result of her Hong Kong upbringing, she had no experience of opera growing up. But as a composer it was something she knew she wanted to do at some point, and she loved the experience of writing *Robin Hood*, yet she was also very nervous. It was her first time writing an opera, and also her first time writing for operatic voices (before that she had only writing one choral work), and also the length somewhat scared her (*Robin Hood* is a substantial three-act work).



Dani Howard: *Robin Hood* - Oliver Brignall, Cliff Zammit Stevens, Nicholas Merryweather  
The Opera Story 2019 (Photo Robert Workman)

Prior to writing *Robin Hood* she needed a clear idea of the structure of a work in her head before she started writing, and with a clear time line she would plot out the emotional content to ensure that the piece flowed. With *Robin Hood* she read the libretto each morning but could not see the shape of the full 90 minute work, there was too much information and too many changes of mood. So in the end she had to break it down, act by act, scene by scene, and the over time she could look back at the music she had written and see the bigger picture.

One of the things that she enjoyed about writing the opera was how collaborative the process was. Usually composition is quite a lonely business, but though the bulk of composition for *Robin Hood* was done by the end of 2018, so much work was done collaboratively after that. Whereas writing an orchestral work can be quite impersonal, with the opera she was able to work with the singers. It helped that they had a great team, with all the performers really wanting to be there.

They started with a general idea about the opera, talking about characters and voice types, then [Zoe Palmer](#) wrote the libretto, collaborating with Rebecca Hurst, and because Palmer was based in the USA there was not so much back and forth. [Polly Graham](#), the director, became involved after the first draft and then Dani started writing. It was very much a learning process for Dani, and she feels she grew in confidence and ability during the process. She would love to do another opera 'at some point' and she feels that her experience with *Robin Hood* would enable her to contribute far more in the initial discussion about the piece.

Her first instrument was a drum kit, at the age of five, and she still loves rhythmically driven music. Her main instruments were cello

and piano, and she received cello lessons from the principal cello of the [Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra](#). She took the instrument seriously but did not want to be a performer. Her cello teacher taught her more than the cello, she credits him with teaching her music and it was whilst doing studying for her GCSE Composition examination that she realised that she wanted to be a composer, and she sent on to study composition at the [Royal College of Music](#).

Dani describes her music as having a clear rhythmic drive, and refers to her style as post-minimalist; she loves minimalism but whilst she uses lots of repetition her style is not minimalist. Whilst not strictly tonal, her pieces are harmonically accessible. She refers to Benjamin Britten (his studying at the Royal College of Music was one of the reasons why she wanted to study there), [John Adams](#) and Debussy as great influences, along with Brahms' chamber music. She is very interested in the music of new American composers such as [Nico Muhly](#), [Mason Bates](#) (here she mentions his opera *The (R)Evolution of Steve Jobs*).

She has a number of projects lined up for next year, and we also talked about the hope that *Robin Hood* might get further performances, enabling her to re-visit the score. As well as the orchestral premieres in Cheltenham and Liverpool, she has some chamber music being performed in Liverpool by the [Pixels Ensemble](#) and the pianist from this group, [Ian Buckle](#), will be premiering her piano piece *The Earl St Vincent*, during the summer.

Full details of all the performances of Dani Howard's music from the events page of [her website](#).